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Reinventing Progress

26

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REINVENTING PROGRESS

THINGS ARE QUICKLY CHANGING IN BOLIVIA - SOME SAY FOR WORSE, SOME SAY FOR THE BETTER. BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THINGS TO IMPROVE? THIS IS PRECISELY WHAT'S CURRENTLY BEING DEBATED ACROSS THE COUNTRY. FÉLIX CÁRDENAS, VICE-MINISTER FOR DECOLONISATION HELPS US UNDERSTAND SOME OF THESE MATERIAL AND SEMANTIC CHANGES.

What do we mean when we talk about a country's development? Up until the end of the century just passed, this was understood as an exercise in national income accounting, generally boiled down to economic statistics, which allowed us to place a country within a ranking of States in terms of GDP. A chart of numbers, dollar signs, and arrows in red or green. That is, an approach arguably better suited to comparing the might of different States in the context of international trade, than a meaningful indicator about the quality of life of its citizens.

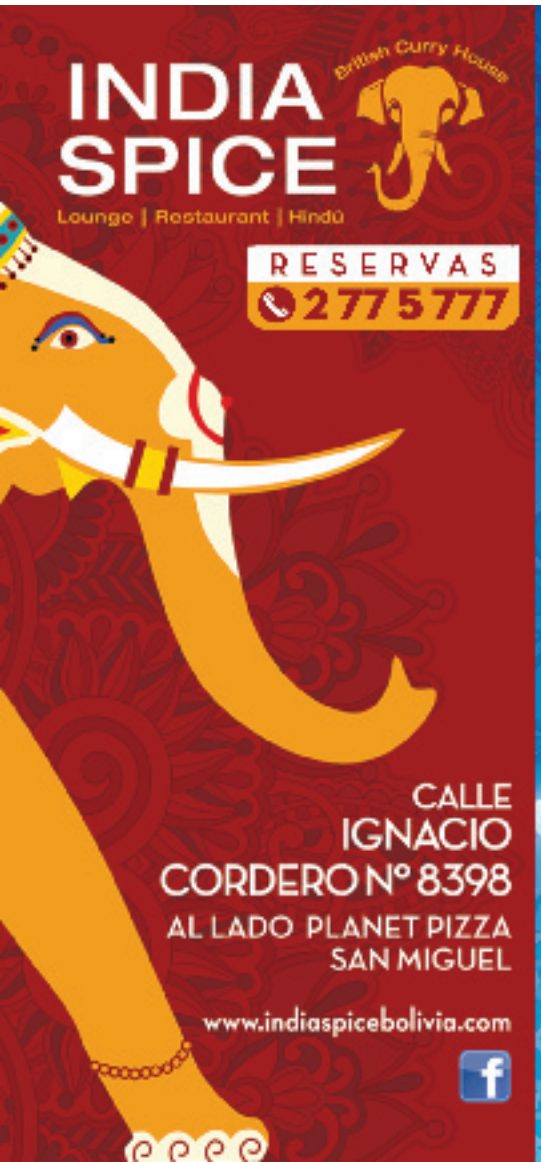
Along came the Human Development Index (HDI), a measure based on the work of Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen at the United Nations, whose central concern was to shift the focus of development towards people; a composite of life expectancy, education and purchasing power. And so, States could once again be placed in a chart, alongside an HDI number ranging from 0 to 1, and their governments could correspondingly be judged according to how much, and how quickly, this number went up or down.

Beyond Progress

Dissenters who thought these approaches were still in need of re-examination, were driven to fundamentally rethink notions of why governments exist in the first place, and what their citizens can legitimately demand of them. In other words, these critics posed profoundly existential questions regarding what is good or valuable for us as human beings, and what constitutes a good life.

One unique example can found in Bhutan, a small South Asian landlocked country, which (both famously and infamously) remains the only state to use measures of happiness to guide state policymaking. Gross National Happiness, as it is called, is a measure steeped in Buddhist spiritual values, and whose calculation incorporates data on pollution, divorce rates, usage of antidepressants, as well as the country's involvement in foreign conflicts. As an upshot of this approach, for example, its citizens had no access

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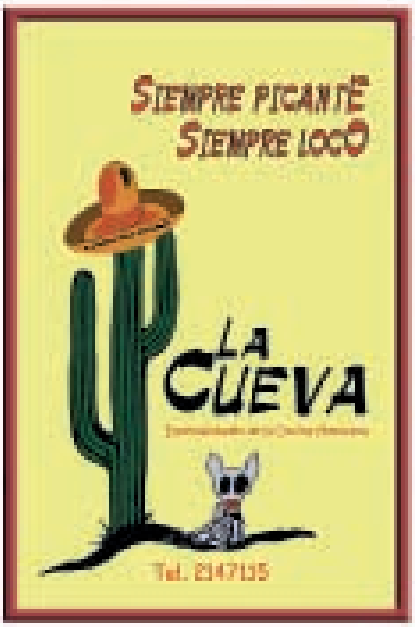


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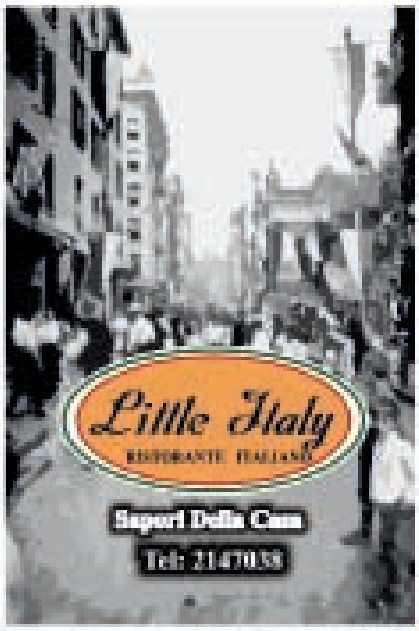
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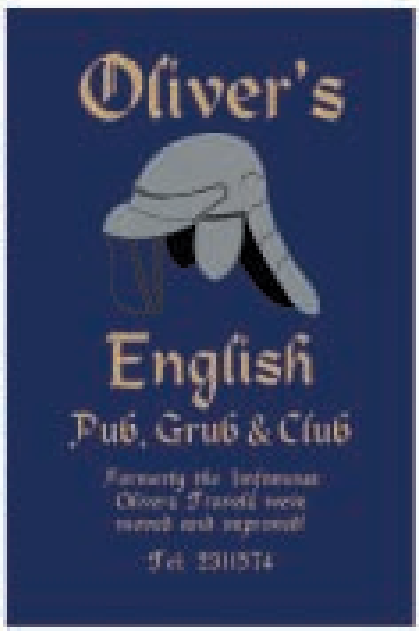
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GLOSSARY

ALTEÑOS	Citizens of El Alto
ARUSKIPASIPXAÑANAKA	'It is my personal knowledge that it is necessary for all of us, including you, to make the effort to communicate'
BOLSITA	'little bag', a common term to denote the soft plastic bags in which drinks are sold across the city.
CAMPO	Countryside
CHOLA	Indigenous woman in traditional dress and bowler hat
CRIOLLO	Used im Colonial times to denote a person born in South America from European parents
KULLAWADA	An Aymara traditional dance
INDIGENISTA CATARISTA	An activist for indigenous culture
INDIO	Pejorative term to refer to socio-ethnic indigenous people, sometimes appropriated by indigenistas
K'EHUA	Aymara word describing neither man nor woman
POLLERA	Long, flowing one-piece skirts, sometimes embroidered, worn by cholitas
PONGO	Indigenous domestic servant
PRESTE	A large party hosted by a member of a community, often in honour of a saint
TALLERES	Workshops



PHOTO: AMARU VILLANUEVA RANCE

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UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Democratisation in Bolivia

With it's latest Constitution, Bolivia has laid the foundations for a new era in its history. While civil society has undergone important transformations, democracy is still being developed.

TEXT: FRANS ROBYNS
PHOTO: AMARU VILLANUEVA RANCE

Democracy is a recent development in Bolivia. It isn't really possible to classify Bolivia as anything approaching a democracy until at least 1987. Plagued by years of military dictatorships, corrupt bureaucrats and nepotistic politicians, it is easy to see why democratisation in this country has, for a long time, been more an ideal than a reality.

Democratic rights only dreamed of before have now been enforced; the social majority of Bolivia has been recognised and enfranchised; and Bolivians now even elect some members of their judiciary. However, there's a grander claim in Bolivia's Constitution which says the country is already 'a participatory democratic, representative and communal form of government,

with equal conditions for men and women'. Bolivia's unique set of quasi-authoritarian political traditions within rural communities, in part legitimised by the Constitution, only adds to the consciousness of democratic scepticism. Inevitable tensions between legitimacy, tradition and democracy are only now beginning to surface. And yet, tremendous strides have been taken in the last ten years, indicating that Bolivia is indeed moving towards a more democratic State and society.

The sweeping reforms of the 2009 Constitution created a fourth and distinct branch of government dedicated exclusively to elections. The Plurinational Electoral Organ, as the branch is called, is composed of five sections, each with different responsibilities, all geared towards the purpose of carrying out free and fair electoral processes.

As a Madisonian instrument within a system of 'checks and balances,' it is certainly a laudable institution. But, at the end of the day, this advance mainly serves to solidify a process that precedes it in chronology and arguably in importance; namely, the enfranchisement of social majorities.

For the majority of Bolivia's history, the country's indigenous population was under-represented both in their access to fundamental rights, and politically within the legislative and executive bodies. The election of Evo Morales was not just a symbolic victory for the indigenous majority, but also a real step towards true political equality. The renaming of the country to the Plurinational State of Bolivia matched a corresponding explosion in the number of rights given to the indigenous majority, many of which were enshrined in the Constitution.

The election of Evo Morales was not just a symbolic victory for the indigenous majority, but also a real step towards true political equality.

The country's traditional elites, historically seen as the guiding force for Bolivia's development, have almost been completely uprooted, politically speaking. Manuel Canelas, a political analyst and host of the TV panel show 'Esta Casa no es un Hotel'; points out how previously, almost all civil servants and government officials came from the same set of privileged schools, even families. The hegemony of power in Bolivia created by years of neoliberalism has been taken apart, and what we now see are new political elites coming from parts of the country that were previously underrepresented. The change has not merely been symbolic. This radical shift in political elites has had a real, tangible effect on Bolivian society.



When asked about examples of racism and discrimination, more than one person spontaneously brought up the example of 'Forum', a nightclub located in the Sopocachi neighbourhood of La Paz (see issue #25) which historically has been host to some of the most exclusive crowds in the city. Just a decade ago, there are several reports of this discotheque denying entry to people with an indigenous appearance, or who appeared to belong to a lower social class. The bouncers at the gate would inform them either that a 'private party' was going on inside, or that they needed an invitation to enter, while freely admitting well-dressed white people standing behind them in the queue.

The hegemony of power in Bolivia created by years of neoliberalism has been taken apart, and what we now see are new political elites coming from parts of the country that were previously underrepresented.

To understand how recent political events have ameliorated such forms of tacit discrimination, it's important to understand democratisation as a process which transcends the political sphere. One can speak, then, of democratisation of access to goods and services across all spheres, public and private. Economic elites are rapidly changing, and with them the social structures which used to underlie them.

But socio-political change is not the only story to tell about Bolivian democratisation. One of the chief achievements of the Morales' government has been the recovery of Bolivian economic sovereignty. During the neo-liberal administrations of the 90s, political and social power was centralised in very few hands, and economic power went to large multinationals, or to Bolivian businessmen with foreign links.

The State and the average citizen were left vulnerable. The government mantra was that Bolivia had to wait for macroeconomic growth and that after that, the wealth would 'trickle-down'. Yet in practice, the resources generated either fell short of expectations, or fell in the hands of a few powerful businessmen. Popula classes were, for all practical purposes excluded from the decisions surrounding the management of these resources. When the people were finally given a say, they put an extraordinary amount of pressure on Morales' government to change the economy.

The first aim of Morales' government was to generate revenue surpluses for the treasury, and did so by nationalising key companies. While this practise has been heavily criticised by voices on the right, the economic indicators of Bolivia have been overwhelmingly positive. As Manuel Canelas tells me, GDP per capita has increased substantially as well as tax revenue collections. Poverty has decreased by 13% and, for the first time in its history, Bolivia has as many people below the poverty line as above it. Yet neoliberals still cry foul, arguing that under these socialist policies the economy will stagnate, shattering consumer confidence and purchasing power; yet consumption has gone through the roof. Morales' socialist policies appear to have been successful, even by capitalist standards.

At the same time, Bolivian democracy can be said to be developing precisely because it is not yet fully developed. While tremendous progress has been made in the economic sphere that I have just discussed, there is still substantial progress to be made in the area of state management of institutions and nationalised companies.

This is caused by an unfortunate combination of old and corrupt bureaucrats, and the new and often inexperienced civil servants. There are more opportunities than ever for bias and arbitrariness. As these newcomers see more money than ever coming into the public sphere, there is more temptation than ever for corruption – and there is plenty of it – a large scale corruption ring involving officials close to the highest echelons of government was recently disbanded. Corruption, however, can be primarily understood as social problem, and as such is ubiquitous in all spheres, public and private. The government is acutely aware of this problem, and President Morales has set the eradication of corruption as primary goal for 2025, and is keen to be seen to be adopting a zero-tolerance approach.

A cornerstone of democracy is the right to free speech and to the freedom of the press. While Bolivian law technically guarantees both types of freedom, a report filed in 2010 by 'Freedom House' describes Bolivia as being only 'partly free' due to 'actions designed to restrict independent media or to encourage self-censorship'. The Morales government has undoubtedly had a strained relationship with the press and, in November 2010, the President himself stated in response to a journalist's question, that 'the largest and the greatest opposition [to this government] are the journalists. Who can deny that? Can you deny this?' This relationship can be explained by reference to his first term in government, where most major media companies were owned or controlled by opposition members. This trend is now reversing, but what remains lamentable is that these organisations are, by inertia, forced to choose sides, resulting in a dearth of a truly independent press.

Freedom of choice, which is after all key to democracy, by definition is only made possible through the existence of alternatives. Unfortunately, there seems to be no strong or coherent opposition force in Bolivia. All that exists is a large number of fractured and quarrelling groups of dissatisfied voters, unsure of the alternative they desire, along with antagonistic and power-seeking opposition candidates unable to articulate an independent discourse or proposal in positive terms.

So, is Bolivia a democracy? Yes and no. Has democracy in Bolivia developed over the past years? It certainly has, but there is still a long way to go. The people of Bolivia are still caught up emotionally in their newfound political power, and are more determined than ever to create an equitable state. Bolivia has found its Mandela, now it needs an Aung San Suu Kyi.


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TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: BOLIVIA LOOKS TO THE FUTURE

TOURISM IN BOLIVIA HAS SKYROCKETED OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS. EMERGING TRENDS ARE COMMUNITARIAN, ECO-FRIENDLY AND HAVE A MARKED DEVELOPMENT AGENDA.

TEXT: HAYDEN ALDREDGE — PHOTO: MICHAEL DUNN C.



From the majestic snow-covered peaks of the Cordillera Real to the dense jungles of the Amazon Basin, Bolivia possesses rich natural beauty. The Salar de Uyuni is growing in renown, and Lake Titicaca is already a popular destination. In addition, cultural and historical roots in Bolivia are less corrupted and more immediately palpable than elsewhere. Yet Bolivia remains one of the least-visited countries in South America.

This is changing: according to a report by the Bolivian Institute for Foreign Trade, tourism in Bolivia grew by a staggering 83 percent since 2001. This is a good thing, and not just for tourists: more people visiting Bolivia translates into more money for the Bolivian economy and the Bolivian people, and it also brings with it new forms of development. I met with Vice Minister of Tourism Marko Machicao Bankovic, who explained the ways through which tourism can be an instrumental part of how the country develops. With new campaigns such as *Bolivia Te Espera* (Bolivia Awaits You), the industry is trying to attract more visitors. It is clear, from talking both to private sector tourism companies and the Vice Minister, that the industry is shaping how Bolivia develops.

A common view of tourism, especially in developing countries, is that it is exploitative. There is a beautiful beach, then some conglomerate builds a large resort on it, sucks money out of the natural beauty until it is no longer profitable, and then moves on. It's a paradox: on one hand, the industry brings money into the local economy; on the other hand, it is often exploitative of either the natural richness of an area, or the people who live there — many times both. Marko Machicao, the Vice Minister of Tourism tells me:
Traditionally, tourism worked towards development by generating small jobs and some basic infrastructure for the community. We're now seeking forms of empowerment. Private companies must have the ability to develop local competencies, they must develop leaders and local entrepreneurs who can take over the tourism sector. It's to change the assistance-oriented tourism approach to one more focused on partnerships. We must generate initiatives which allow local communities to manage their own offerings and work in healthy competition.

The government's objective for to become a major tourist destination by 2025, precisely involves reversing this trend. As the Vice Minister of Decolonisation Félix Cárdenas tells the BX:

*We cannot continue projecting the image of impoverished Bolivian **indios** searching among the rubbish, asking Europe for help. It's to exploit the poverty of these people, instead of showing their lives and worldviews. Communitarian tourism would involve an equal exchange; for an English family, for example, to live alongside a Guaraní family, and for this process to be managed by the family itself, instead of a tourism agency. I believe that we have to show that we're not a museum piece, we're a reality.*

Bolivia is in a unique situation, though. Tourism in the country didn't become popular in the second half of the twentieth century like it did in other South American countries, such as Brazil, Argentina, and Peru. But tourism is now increasing at a frenetic pace. According to the Vice Ministry of Tourism, the industry generated $378 million in revenues last year and was responsible for 250,000 jobs. Now, with the popularization of 'eco-tourism', or 'good-conscience tourism', Bolivia is becoming an increasingly popular country to visit. 'We're not going to start selling

beaches, casinos, and partake in that type of consumerism', says Minister of Culture Pablo Groux, who oversees the work of the Vice Ministry of Tourism. 'What we can sell are landscapes, history and identity.' To that end, Bolivia's latest campaign focuses on community and nature tourism, which it hopes will create an integral experience that shows the world what it is that makes Bolivia so special. As Marko Machicao explains:

There are perverse models, such as Cuzco, where you see an almost cinematographic exposition of who the people are. We think people want to come to Bolivia to know communities as they really are. Another reason they come is that they want to see a country under construction. Who we are is still being defined.

'What we can sell are landscapes, history and identity.'

But no matter how much time and money the government spends on the tourism industry—through advertising or the ubiquitous tourism offices in city centers— true change must come from the private sector. Private companies are responsible for developing the industry, and it's incumbent on them to develop responsible practices that will contribute to the positive growth of this country. Two privately-owned organisations have begun this practice and are setting a standard that others are already following.

Gravity Assisted Mountain Biking, founded in 1998, was the first company to run trips down the 'World's Most Dangerous Road'. Gravity is now leading the charge into large-scale eco-tourism. With its carbon-neutral 2012 initiative, the company is seeking to not only become the first carbon-neutral company in Bolivia, but also to assist the tiny rural villages that are located at the end of the 'Death Road'. These small communities, set amidst the idyllic jungle-covered mountains and valleys of the Yungas region, are struggling immensely due to the opening of the new road connecting Coroico to La Paz across the valley. This diverted almost all traffic, the lifeblood of these village's economies, away from the 'Death Road'. Gravity, which in an extensive study calculated its emissions at ninety tonnes of carbon dioxide per year, partnered with a group called Inti Illimani to provide solar ovens for these communities. The ovens reduce the reliance on gas and firewood, can last eight to ten years, and offset an average of over two tonnes of carbon dioxide per year. Not only do the ovens reduce the overall production of carbon dioxide, they provide a means for rural families to cook that isn't dependent on the energy grid—or how much they can pay for power.

Another major Bolivian tourist destination, the city of Potosí, sees roughly 74,000 people annually, most of whom visit the eerie mines of Cerro Rico, the cone-shaped mountain that casts its shadow over the city. Many tourists who exit the still-operating mines leave feeling that something should be done about the horrible working conditions under the mountain. Following her visit in 1994, Margaret Kamphuis did just that. The Netherlands native is now the head of Amigos de Potosí, an organization dedicated to improving the lives of local miners. Amigos has provided large water tanks and electricity in the mines, something that Wilber F. Garnica, operations manager for Koala Tours Agency in Potosí, and a leader on the ground for Amigos, says many other groups have imitated in Cerro Rico. The ultimate goal of the organization is to provide young men in rural areas surrounding the city alternative career paths to mining. Amigos de Potosí is now focusing on vocational training in the surrounding rural areas. Guided tours that show the terrible conditions of Cerro Rico have long been one of the most exploitative tourist attractions in Bolivia. But Amigos de Potosí is now part of a number of organizations that are attempting to turn this particular aspect of the tourism industry into a positive.

While there are a number of things that must be addressed within Bolivia in terms of tourism, from better transportation systems to improved safety, perhaps the most important goal that everyone involved in the industry must focus on, is maintaining the culture and natural beauty of Bolivia. At the same time, opportunities must be provided for Bolivians themselves to find development and economic security in their own terms. Whatever happens, it is extremely crucial for the organizations that influence these things—such as the government and organizations like Gravity Assisted Mountain Biking and Amigos de Potosí—to understand that this is a most important period of development for the tourism industry in Bolivia, and in many ways, for the country itself.×





THE WHITE GOLD

LITHIUM

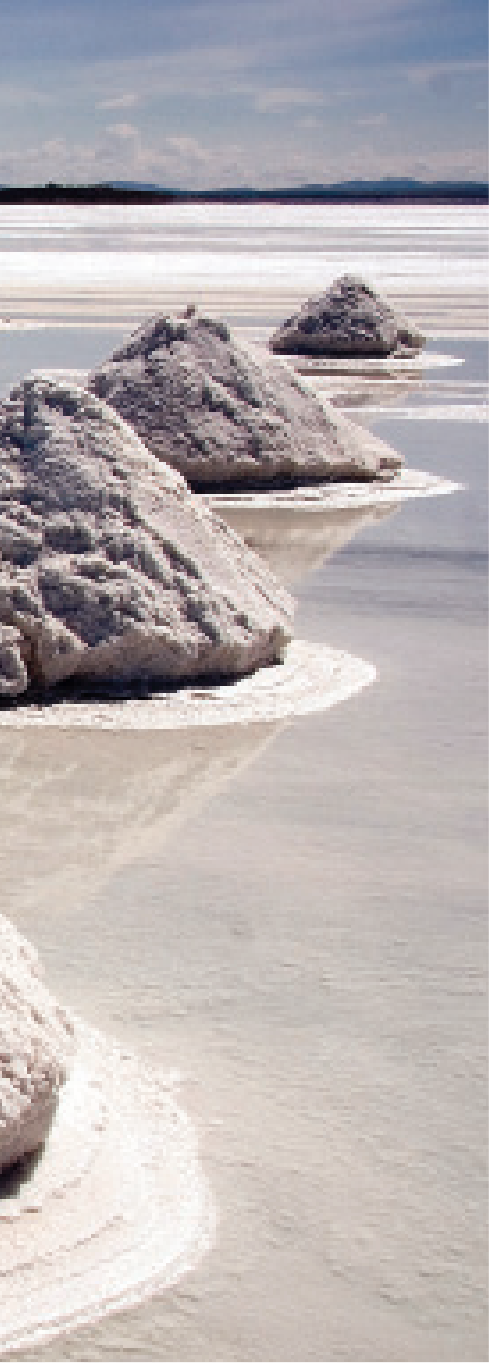
TEXT: CAROLINE RISACHER
PHOTO: LUCA GALUZZI-WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The need for alternative energy sources is increasingly becoming a worldwide priority. Oil and natural gas, on which we have become so reliant, are not sustainable sources. Efforts to change our ways, however, seem to be moving slowly, and have stagnated due to political interests that continue to benefit the large energy firms. In this international game, the arrival of lithium an alternative energy source could potentially alter a global dynamic, introducing a new and unexpected player: Bolivia.

Lithium is used in glasses, ceramics, lubricants, chemical products, aluminum and pharmaceuticals. It is the world's lightest and least dense metal, and offers remarkable properties. It is also a component of mood stabilizing medication to treat bipolar disorder. Yet lithium is mostly commonly known these days for its current use in our mobile phones and laptop's batteries, as well as for its potential use in powering the electric car of the future. For political, technological and economical reasons, the electric car has failed until now to become a convincing replacement to cars that run on gasoline. That said, the development of more efficient lithium batteries could help the electric car not only become a reality, but also a commercial success. Today, there are 300 000 electric cars in the world, but some economists predict that in the next 10-20 years, more than 16 million could be produced and sold.

Bolivia's lithium is present in pools of brine located under the salt flats, mostly in the Salar de Uyuni (4,086 sq mi) and Coipasa, both of which are located in the regions of Potosi and Oruro, where according to some calculations, the country has 100 millions tons of the metal. Even by conservative estimates, Bolivia has more lithium than the rest of the world combined. United States, China, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Australia also have lithium deposits and exploit them to varying degrees.

In the case of Bolivia, which has the largest reserves and the greatest po-



tential, the presence of natural gas in the country's territory could represent an important advantage to its lithium extraction. Bolivia's enormous natural gas reserves could help it produce lithium at a minimal cost and in a self-sufficient manner.

Energetic resources are becoming the new gold of this century's challenge, and Bolivia, with 50 to 70% of the world's lithium reserves is ideally placed to benefit. Lithium could be more than a financial gain for the country (a ton of lithium carbonate sold for around $5000 in 2012), it could give a strategic importance to Bolivia that could sway the geopolitical balance of the region – even the world – in its favor.

According to Lithium Specialist, Juan Carlos Zuleta Calderón, Bolivia holds the key of the electric era. It could inject enough lithium in global markets to control and dominate prices, the way Saudi Arabia has been influencing the global price of oil. Given the quantity of lithium resting underneath its territory, Bolivia could play an important hand in determining the prices of lithium batteries, making them accessible to people and accelerating the adoption of the electric car.

Bolivia holds the key of the electric era. It could inject enough lithium in global markets to control and dominate the prices the way Saudi Arabia has been managing its oil.

Unfortunately, Bolivia is not yet ready to face this challenge. Chile, the leading lithium producer in the world, with 66 000 tons extracted per year, and Argentina, have been extracting lithium for almost twenty years. Bolivia's resources have been known since the eighties, but have only recently started to be explored.

Regrettably, the focus of Bolivia's lithium project has generated more political than scientific activity. Uncertainty from foreign investors, a lack of political motivation, and a clear plan has worked against its advancement. The major problem is the dearth of Bolivian experts with the knowhow to extract and transform lithium. Technically, exploiting lithium is an extremely difficult task, and making batteries from it even more so. Even if China, Chile, the United States manage to extract and treat their lithium, those techniques can't just be copypasted to Bolivia's salt flats.

The extraction of lithium in Bolivia is made difficult by two technical difficulties. First, its lithium is located in an area where the evaporation process conventionally used is slower than normal, delaying its extraction for months– if not years. Secondly, unlike in Chile or Argentina, the magnesium, borax, potassium and other components present in the brine need to be separated in order to obtain lithium in its purest form. This makes the process increasingly difficult. On the other hand, these additional resources could be an added value for Bolivia, as magnesium, which has similar properties to aluminum, could be used as a substitute for steel.

On a political level, analyst Juan Carlos Zuleta Calderon raises the question and consequences of Bolivia's alliances with Iran and Venezuela, direct competitors in the energy race and potential obstacles to the development of a lithium-based economy.

To be able to sell lithium batteries of Bolivian production will take several years and will require higher efforts from the government to accelerate the ongoing process. After years of discussions with France, Korea, China, Japan, and even Iran, Bolivia let Korean, Chinese and Japanese companies start working on their proposed projects. In January 2013, the Bolivian government inaugurated a lithium plant, with a 19 million dollars. This pilot plant is initially expected produce 40 metric tons of lithium carbonate per year, a minimal quantity compared to the overall potential of the Salar's resources.

For now, the opening of the plant appears to be more symbolic than a true advancement, and is unlikely to tangibly affect the lives of common Bolivians. But the promise is there. The challenge for this country is to act faster, to avoid plundering from foreign companies, and to ensure that locals benefit from the gains, involving local communities in a consultation.

Bolivia aims at industrializing 100% of its lithium and at initiating production of batteries. If this can be achieved, Bolivia could indeed become the 'new Saudi Arabia' of South America and experience a growth similar to countries such as South Korea. The first step in this marathon has been taken, we now need to make sure we remain in the running.



'POVERTY CAN BE VERY CREATIVE'

PAUL KRUGMAN, MISQUOTED IN - THE ECONOMIST -



PHOTO: AMARU VILLANUEVA RANCE

OUT OF THE CLOSET, INTO THE FIRE?

TEXT: FELICIA LLOYD
PHOTO: K-OS GALÁN



CHANGES IN BOLIVIAN LAWS SIGNAL SOME PROGRESS TOWARDS RECOGNISING SEXUAL FREEDOMS, THOUGH FOR GAY RIGHTS TO IMPROVE IN PRACTICE, SOCIETY MUST FOLLOW SUIT. CAN CULTURE HOLD THE KEY FOR CHANGE?

A good starting point to understand the historical development of gay rights in Bolivia, is an examination of how the LGBT community was regarded in pre-colonial times. According to Bartolomé de las Casas (a Spanish historian and Dominican friar), upon the arrival of the Spanish in Latin America, the amount of sexual diversity in practice amongst the indigenous people was 'surprising'. Brothels with male prostitutes offered light relief for warriors coming back from battle, and images of men dressed as women were worshipped in sacred buildings. In fact, if a man wished to dress as a woman he could do so, find a husband and marry. Unsurprisingly the conquistadores, sentinels of the intransigent Catholic Church, found these practices abhorrent and promptly set about eradicating them.

Since the Catholic Church bases its attitude towards homosexuality on interpretation of the Scriptures, which define homosexual acts of intercourse as being in opposition to the divine nature of procreation, such behavior is considered 'disorderly'. Interestingly, a dominant interpretation of the Scriptures holds that while homosexual desires isn't itself sinful, the acts to which these desires give rise are. As a consequence, the Church's response at the time was to deliver the corresponding treatment to those engaged in this type of behaviour, and regard all homosexual conduct as 'diseased'. Yet, as we now know, this wasn't an attitude confined to former Spanish colonies; the world as a whole had to wait until 1990 for the General Assembly of the World Health Organisation to remove 'homosexuality' from its list of mental illnesses, marking the long overdue evolution of attitudes within Western society.

Despite these advances, more than 500 years later, the Church (in it's various guises, from Catholic to Evangelical), still exert a strong influence over Bolivia's public morality. It goes without saying they don't support the now universal fight for sexual rights. As a result, many 'out and proud' homosexuals in Bolivia are subject to discrimination across various sectors of society. A national survey founded by 'Emancipación Conexión' in 2011, reported that 33% of Bolivian gays have said they have been discriminated against at school, by both teachers and classmates, with 15% claiming unequal treatment in access to healthcare services. This happens despite several articles in the 2009 Boli-

vian Constitution which declare all forms of discrimination against race, age, gender identity, and sexual orientation, to be illegal, and which understand freedom of sexual orientation as a fundamental human right.

Despite the discrimination being tightly woven into dominant social attitudes, the LGBT community has sought new forms of expression and found increased engagement with society at large, most notably in La Paz and Santa Cruz, the two largest cities in Bolivia.

While there have been important advances in urban areas, as far as gay rights and social acceptance of homosexuality are concerned, rural regions seem to exist in a different time-space continuum. In the **campo**, Andean conceptions and beliefs are combined in mysterious ways with Catholic values. Reflecting upon his work in the community of Wila Kjarka, the anthropologist Andrew Canessa explains: 'they know about different sexuality, they know about homosexuality, but they don't do it themselves. Homosexuality for them is what mestizos and gringos do. [Other researchers] might say I'm wrong, but I have no evidence at all that people have same sex relations'. Whether or not widespread same-sex relations exist, they appear to be virtually invisible. Traditional metaphysical beliefs, in which the sun and moon have a union of 'duality and complementarity', hold that men and women should emulate this cosmic duality. Those who are deemed to be homosexual, are dubbed **k'ehua**—neither man nor woman. Either due to discrimination or alienation, many rural gay people migrate to the comparatively more accepting urban areas.

Although far from being internalised by civil society, the recent additions to the Constitution signal a development towards a more accepting attitude, as well as a desire to make room for minority communities in Bolivian society. After all, in a Plurinational State made up of 36 nations, almost everyone is part of some minority or another. Yet there are ongoing challenges. In 2012, two bills were submitted to the legislature, one requesting the right to a 'cohabitation contract' for same-sex couples, and the second for the introduction of gay marriage with a right to adoption, though there's been minimal progress to date on both fronts. The Constitution itself hasn't been without its setbacks: an early draft declared that marriage was a civil contract between two people, yet the final version of the Constitution adopted in 2009, was altered to specify that this civil contract was between a man and woman, no doubt influenced by the Church's 'invisible hand'.

Statistics from the 2011 survey report that when members of the LGBT community come out to their family, 65% say they were accepted, yet 22% were 'chased from their homes'. So what is it like to be an out-of-the-closet gay in Bolivian society? I asked Maria Galindo, an openly declared lesbian activist, whose feminist group Mujeres Creando not only promotes depatriarchalisation, but also urges society to confront homophobia. Galindo says that by outing herself as a lesbian, she 'started a social fight,' and that the problem lies in 'a concept of normality in which there is no space for the gay man, the lesbian, the single mother, the clever girl or the fat girl'. Nevertheless, Galindo says that although as a woman in a machista society she faces male threats of violence, she also receives a lot of love and acceptance from those around her.

Another out gay Bolivian, David Aruquipa, is a member of the self-identified drag queen family La Familia Galán. Danna Galán, as he goes by, says that this family does not submit to the 'conservative and Christianised concept' of traditional families, and that they are 'free, poetic, loving and connected' to each other. Although La Familia Galan are a family of drag queens, they prefer not to be defined and categorised by their identity; be it heterosexual, homosexual or transvestite. Their cultural and political activities, most recently given a platform by their TV show 'Transformando', have been as much about performativity as sexual diversity.

From talking to Maria and David/Danna, it's both surprising and refreshing to see that discourses surrounding gay rights have evolved substantially from traditional stories of pure oppression and discrimination. In these new voices, their communities are finding exuberant, fierce, and creative expressions capable of reaching new corners of society. Moreover, their unique experiences suggest it's not necessarily possible to speak of a single LGBT community in Bolivia. The sexual diversity that can be found in the country is as beautifully fragmented as the voices it gives rise to.

So what is the future for the homosexual community in Bolivia, if it's conceivable to speak of such a univocal entity with a single set of interests? One can hope Bolivian laws and attitudes ride the wave of events happening elsewhere, and legalisation of gay marriage eventually arrives. Given the influence the Church has maintained over the centuries, this may not happen soon. One important lesson from the Constitution is that laws are useless without a change in social attitudes. As Maria Galindo puts it, 'there is nothing more useless than a rhetorical law'. As far as society is concerned, David Aruquipa seems to have found that the best remedy for discrimination can't come from outside, it must come from within;

I criticise the notion that gender and sexuality are peripheral issues which are not part of culture, that they only belong to gays and lesbians. Culture has never engaged with these themes upfront. We are here to say that gender is not simply the concern of feminists, and that sexuality isn't simply a property of TLGBs. We take culture as the starting point from where everything is transformed.

DAVID ARUQUIPA/DANNA GALÁN

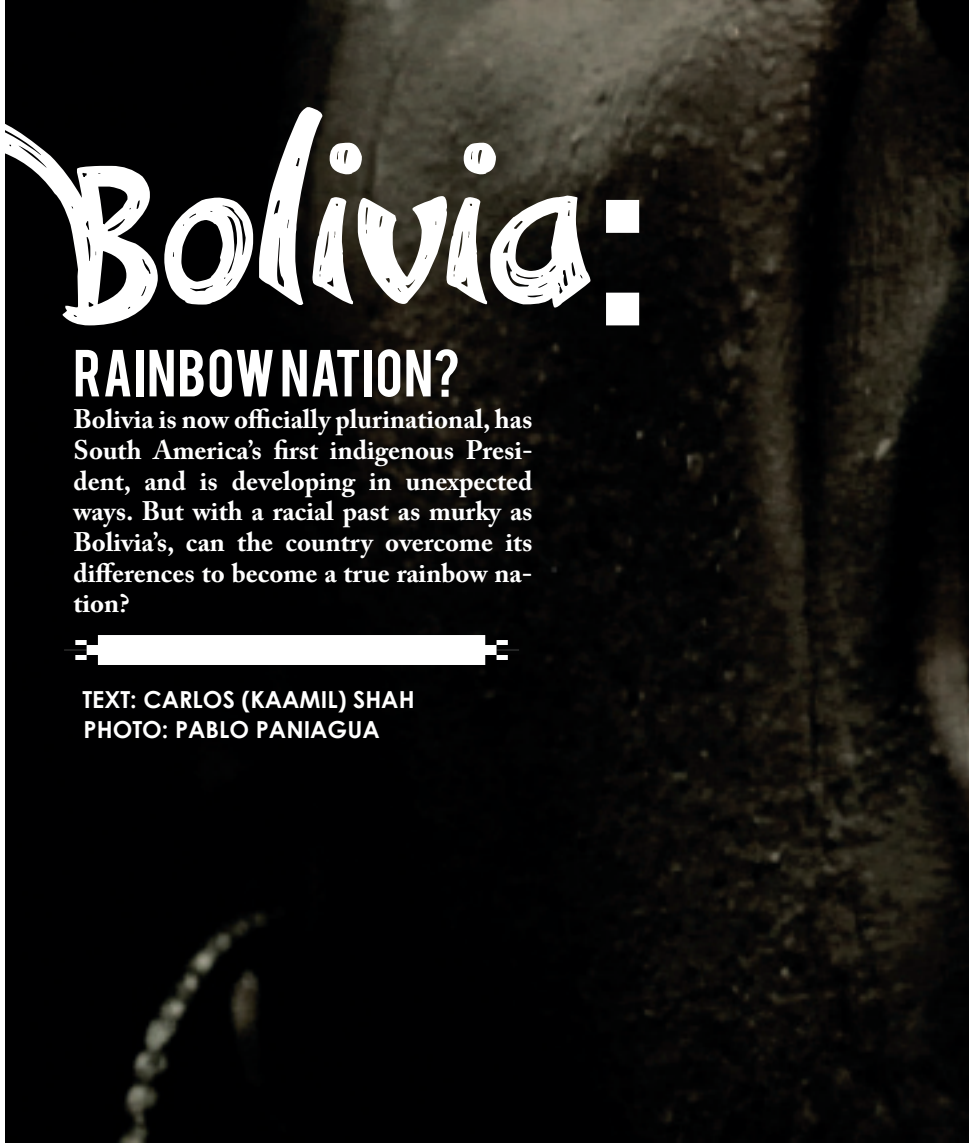
"At the start we used to be marginal, but the Familia Galan has now been co-opted by society, who've taken over and appropriated the Familia. By being a standard feature of Carnival [through **Kullawada**], we've forced our entry into the sphere of what's most sacred in popular culture: traditional dance. Entering this space has resulted in the Family not acting from the margins, but becoming infiltrated at the core of society like a virus. We want to engage in a constant deconstruction of cultural dynamics to transform this space. We are penetrating popular culture."

Bolivia:

RAINBOW NATION?

Bolivia is now officially plurinational, has South America's first indigenous President, and is developing in unexpected ways. But with a racial past as murky as Bolivia's, can the country overcome its differences to become a true rainbow nation?

TEXT: CARLOS (KAAMIL) SHAH
PHOTO: PABLO PANIAGUA



'The issue of race is not black and white here, like in America,' Bethel Nuñez explains, 'It is extremely complex and nuanced; It is such a difficult issue,' she tells me, 'that it goes beyond consciousness.'

As a foreign journalist in Bolivia, I have found that, in this palpably diverse Latin American country, there are more differences of opinion regarding race —and contradictions between them— than I ever expected. What I have found is a story of progress and setbacks, of hope and disillusionment; a story that, despite government efforts and valiant activism, ends with a question that remains unanswered: how far or how close does Bolivia stand today from becoming 'post-racial'?

Ever since the conquest of South America, when the indigenous population suffered in manifold ways at the hands of its colonizers, the racial past of Bolivia has been dark and taboo. Unlike in Europe, the wars during the conquest in Latin America were not assumed to be wars between equals, local historian Magdalena Cajías tells me. According to her, the origin of the anti-indigenous racism that exists to this day stems from that period.

Bolivia's independence did very little to improve the life of Bolivia's majority in this respect. Until the Revolution of 1952, indigenous people practically had no rights or power to speak of. Many were ruthlessly exploited by the powerful classes, as Eduardo Galeano points out, speaking of the plight of the Bolivian **pongo**. Before the revolution, he explains: 'the **pongo** slept beside the dog, ate the leftovers of his dinner, and knelt when speaking to anyone with white skin'.

Some might say that racism in Bolivia isn't comparable to that experienced by slaves in Southern USA or apartheid South Africa, but it is hard to deny that its wounds have cut deep into Bolivian society.

Carlos Marcusaya, an **indigenista catarista**, told me in a recent interview, that in Bolivia 'blanco used to be a synonym for rich'. And indeed, nowhere more so than in Latin America has racism so clearly had an economic slant. Galeano argues that, worse still, 'the Indians were victims of their own wealth.' Racism suited the **Criollo** upper classes, allowing them to both take the natural wealth of the native people and exploit them for labour.

In a society historically founded on racism, the election of President Evo Morales in 2005 came as shock to many. People expected Morales to help write a new story of race and power in Bolivia.

His critics, though, say that instead of ushering in a new era of post-racial and modern development politics in Bolivia, Morales has done the very opposite. His opponents claim that Morales has used his race as a political tool, increasing the tension and hostility between different ethnic groups in Bolivia. Luis Eduardo Siles, a journalist writing from the opposition, put it bluntly: 'Morales had the chance to be the Mandela of the Andes,' he said, 'but instead he chose to be the Mugabe.' In a similar tone to Siles, right-wing Peruvian presidential candidate and Nobel Laureate, Mario Vargas Llosa, said with reference to Evo Morales that 'to put the Latin American problem in terms of race is reckless, demagogic and irresponsible.'

> 'We want a Bolivia free of racism by 2025'

Morales's controversial discourse around ethnicity and identity throughout his presidency, may be the cause of the fear that has arisen in Bolivia around the idea of 'reverse racism'.

According to members of the Observatorio del Racismo (Observatory of Racism), the concept of reverse racism is more complicated than it seems. Politically, they explain, it may have manifested itself as a result of the current climate, but it is in no way similar to the racism suffered by indigenous people within the institutions of the country.

In a study conducted by the Observatory, the centre found that racism and inequa-



lity are endemic within the walls of the educational system in Bolivia. There exists an inequality of outcome between white and indigenous students as well as a lack of social mixing within these groups.

If you talk to indigenistas about the 'phenomenon' of reverse racism, they're likely to laugh at the thought of it. According to them, there are more severe, underlying problems of racism towards non-white people in Bolivia than those that affect the white population.

Marcusaya, one such indigenista, claims that open racism still exists at an institutional level in the country. For example, military schools in the country, he said, still discriminate applicants based on physical characteristics and the origin of their surnames.

Something similar happens in the media. While a local TV station here might see fit to use an Aymara presenter in its screenings, this is much less common on national TV. To a foreigner, it might be astonishing to learn that in a country with an indigenous majority, people from these ethnic groups are confined to appearing as museum pieces, their identity confined to the traditions they are associated with. They appear wearing **polleras** and typical indigenous dress and are never associated with ideals of beauty or modern development.

Even worse are the incidents of racial violence, of which the indigenous majority is most often the victim. In 2008, for example, in the city of Sucre, an anti-Evo Morales demonstration became a racist attack against his mainly indigenous supporters.

Just as damaging to indigenous people in Bolivia is their internalisation of racism. In a conversation with Carlos Marcusaya, the activist compared racism to sexism in terms of how easily both become normalised. This is how the insult **indio** has entered into common use.

Aymaras, Quechuas and **Cholas** of Bolivia have experienced racism over such a long period that it often goes unquestioned and not worth seen as confronting. Experts say that racism in Bolivia has held back its development due to how it has excluded and demotivated a great portion of the population that now finds it difficult to integrate into modern society as equals.

This is not to say that there has been no progress at all on the race issue in recent years. Economically, the formerly oppressed and exploited classes of Bolivia have quickly become a rising and affluent group within the country.

'While white people and the upper classes still have money, most of this is through inheritance.' Marcusaya told me, adding that 'indigenous people are becoming rich through businesses such as importing and trading.'
Indeed, a cursory glance at the mainly non-white city of El Alto demonstrates the upward mobility of many indigenous people, their place within Bolivian society has decisively improved.

On its side, the Bolivian government has been making significant efforts to combat racism in the country. On interviewing the Vice-Minister of Decolonisation — possibly the only senior government official with such a title in the world— I was given an insight into the efforts to cure Bolivia of its institutionalised discrimination. According to the Vice-Minister, the government aims for 'a Bolivia free from discrimination and racism by 2025.'

A recently passed racism law in the country has pushed the issue to the top of the political agenda. The enforcement of that law, however, has proved a difficult task for the government.

The case of journalist Claudia Soruco, who upon being attacked and racially insulted tried to take legal action against her attackers, is especially illustrative of this point. Despite Soruco's efforts, the state failed to lend her support, making her unable to follow up the investigation.

Progress is clear in the fight against racism in the country and in the improvement of the lives of indigenous people. Their growing affluence in previously impoverished socio-ethnic groups in the country, along with the renaming of Bolivia to a 'Plurinational State', are clear signs of the advancement of indigenous people in this society. Ultimately, though, only a concerted effort from all sectors of Bolivian society can make racism truly a thing of the past.

ARTFUL REBELLION

CONNOR LARSON EXPLORES HOW ART IS HELPING EL ALTO'S YOUTHS FIND PERSONAL GROWTH. A VOLUNTEER, AN MC, AND THE MINISTER OF CULTURES PABLO GROUX HELP HER UNDERSTAND HOW THEIR CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS CAN ALSO HELP SOCIETY DEVELOP.

TEXT: CONNOR LARSON
PHOTOS: MICHAEL DUNN C.

El Alto is a city of contrasts. The seeming lack of consistency in the appearance of not just the people but the city itself adds a certain indefinable charm, as though El Alto was not designed or planned, but simply came to be. A well-dressed businessman rushes past a begging mother, whilst a red traffic light leaves a brand-new SUV idled next to rusted taxi. Walking through the bustling streets, it's hard to believe that a mere sixty years ago this sprawling city was home to only approximately 11,000 inhabitants. Severe droughts in the 1940s, a subsequent agrarian reform, government-driven neoliberal initiatives in the '80s, and a long-term national shift towards urbanization resulted in a mass migration of indigenous Bolivians to El Alto, transforming the insignificant airport town into the fastest-expanding urban area in Bolivia—though it has only been officially acknowledged as a separate municipality for twenty-five years. Today, though the city is infamous for its high levels of poverty and petty crime (this I can confirm, as I had my phone pick-pocketed there on my second day in South America), El Alto holds itself with an air of accomplishment and pride, a uniqueness acquired from its unusual community-based organizational structure, and its stance of defiance towards discrimination, in part caused by its mockingly close proximity to La Paz, Bolivia's contrastingly well-developed and beautified administrative capital.

Citizens of El Alto—or **alteños**—are typically first- to third-generation migrants; a generation of youth having both indigenous and urban roots, at high risk of being marginalized and disregarded by elders unfamiliar with this 'dual socialization'.

How do the people of El Alto identify themselves in such an environment? For youth in particular, elements of racism, political exclusion, poverty and lack of proper education create a mixing pot of potential destruction in terms of self-identification. There's also an inherent conflict between the growing Westernization of Bolivian society and a still-strong traditional indigenous background. Growing up in El Alto, youths risk marginalization, with a large amount of discrimination from the wealthier, whiter citizens of La Paz. But it isn't just the inhabitants of El Alto who are discriminated against: Bolivia as a whole has been exploited and its people disregarded by much of the Western world for centuries. **Alteños** not only live in one of the poorest cities in the country, but in one of the poorest countries on the continent. As a result, parents can overcompensate by trying to 'westernize' their children, giving them Spanish names and ignoring Aymaran traditions, leaving them with little sense of pride about their heritage. Lack of education is also a huge problem, with many youths leaving school at a young age in order to work and earn money for their families. This in turn provides no stable basis for the next generation to remove themselves from the poverty they were born into, creating a vicious circle. A lack of opportunities, little government support, higher-than-average illiteracy rates, and poor role models also deter these youths from breaking the cycle. Additionally, there is also a strong distrust of politicians, creating a rift between youth and government bodies, pushed further apart by the standard authoritarian parenting style, giving young Bolivians little influence, even in their own households.



The youth of El Alto have hence turned to their own peer groups in search of social approval, a change which could potentially have disastrous consequences. Interestingly, however, a diverse array of youth groups which channel their struggles with injusti-



ce through art, music and dance, have appeared. I spoke to Charlie, a volunteer for COMPA, the umbrella organization for Teatro Tono, a theatre space in El Alto providing free **talleres** for young people. The organization is housed in a building made completely of recycled materials, reflecting El Alto's 'inconsistency'. No two doors are the same, the walls are splotched with multicolored paint and doodlings, and a cylindrical staircase spirals through the building's centre. 'It's a family here', Charlie insisted, when asked about the bonds formed among the youths at COMPA. COMPA tries neither to direct nor 'mould' the youth participants; its only ideology is 'we accept everything except fascism', allowing these youths to explore 'inwards, to their core', and find their own balance between their indigenous roots and the inevitable 'migration of culture to the West'. Another notable quality of this form of expression is that nothing is preached or forced upon these youths, they 'don't supply the recipe, only the tools'. Thus allowing the children to find their own identity, and preventing a return to previous ways when the influence of the group is absent.

I went to talk to Minister for Cultures Pablo Groux about what development means in the context of culture. In our interview, he acknowledged the value of positive intervention without limiting youth in their expressions, explaining the country gives rise to 'various hues of what you could define as cultural expressions'. Most importantly, he explains why his is a Ministry of CultureS, in the plural. 'One of the reasons for this has to do with the variety of ecosystems and environments you find within these million or so square kilometres', he tells me, and goes on to explain how 'many of these are expressions of indigenous resistance which show the strong colonization process that took place here [...] We need to emphasise recuperation without overlooking new emerging cultural forms currently in the making'. The government show themselves open to supporting cultural initiatives which arise from civil society. 'We try to support projects which arise from society without any type of restriction'.

Many of these are expressions of indigenous resistance which show the strong colonization process that took place here.

There have been many success stories: a program director was stopped on the street by a mother of one of the girls involved in COMPA. She began to tell him of her own upbringing and traditions, how her family maintained quite formal relationships, in which affection was never a priority. But her eyes lit up as she told of the changes in her daughter since being part of the theatre program. Not only had she become more expressive and affectionate with her mother, but she had hugged her for the first time in years. The program's most commonly stated outcome is 'a big growth in self-confidence and self-love', and it 'creates an alternative for expression that's nonviolent and nonaggressive', giving these kids a way to 'have a voice'. But it isn't just the youth who join these organisations directly that benefit from such cultural movements; these influences have also gained popularity beyond the streets, touching more lives than a single organization ever could.

Ariel Desmond, an MC I interviewed in La Paz, was not at all like I expected. He smiled shyly and chewed his water **bolsita** as I introduced myself in broken Spanish. After an hour-long interview three things were clear: he was in no way a thug or menace to society, he was very far from apathetic towards the struggles of his community, and rap meant more to him then a drum beat and profanities. Desmond first discovered his talent at a hip-hop marathon in El Alto in 2005. 'The competition brings us together', he comments when asked about the camaraderie that unites him to his fellow rappers. He tells of his first experience with hip-hop and how, on stage, he 'let himself free'. He agreed that hip-hop deters young people from drugs and crime, but accepted that he had his own 'rebellious stage', during which he found condolence in using rap as his 'diary'. Desmond epitomizes the positive benefits of these artistic movements. While Desmond doesn't describe himself as a revolutionary, he says that 'politics are in everything' and 'anyone who does rap is like a politician, his rap is his word'.

In a community where so few have a voice, Desmond's testimony of the benefits of self-expression through unconventional means is only one from a chorus of young people emanating the same expressive desires. Such is the impact of the movement that even those who aren't associated with an organization such as COMPA have began to explore the art of self-expression independently, with positive benefits. In such a unique, and in many ways unjust society, anything that allows the release of frustrations and exploration of identity through non-destructive ways should be greeted with open arms and an open mind.



PHOTO: IVAN RODRIGUEZ PETKOVIC

Continued from page 3

to international TV content until 1999, as it was claimed it ultimately made them unhappy, by making them chase after lifestyles unattainable to them.

At what price happiness?

To live in Bhutan before 1999 was to live in a bubble, in proverbial ignorant bliss. For critics, such a State is paternalistic at best, but more generally authoritarian and sponsored by perverse forms of censure — not to mention the country was an absolute monarchy until 2008. A vision of such a State couldn't fulfill the most fundamental of liberal ideals: freedom, a value now politically and semantically appropriated by our friends up North. Yet in all its eccentricity, Bhutan's approach wasn't exactly lacking in external validation. In 2006, Business Week ranked this State as the eighth happiest in the world.

Spin the globe halfway, drag your finger down a few latitudes and you'll find you're looking at Bolivia, a country whose government is similarly challenging notions of what it means to develop, progress, and most importantly, to live well. Beyond socioeconomic indicators, the new emphasis seems to be on less tangible values such as sovereignty and identity, not as easily amenable to Excel spreadsheets, and certainly not straightforwardly measurable.

Reinventing Politics

The magnitude of this enterprise cannot be overstated. As Félix Cárdenas, Vice Minister of Decolonisation tells us,

We are in agreement that we're after a new way to live, a new civilizatory paradigm. That's what's under discussion. There are people who think we need to build a form of communitarian socialism, or Andean capitalism. We propose neither one nor the other, but rather to take ourselves as a starting point. The name is not important, but rather what we're after: a new type of society. We want to understand, conceptually, what it is we want as a country.

Cárdenas states that this initiative is given credence due to the failure of modernity, arguing that since Bolivia's foundation we have always sought to understand who we are. To cite but one example, Rene Zabaleta Mercado, one of Bolivia's most prominent political thinkers of the 20th Century, remarked that the thousands of disenfranchised indigenous soldiers who fought in the Chaco War of 1932, went to fight and die for a country which did not yet fully recognise them as citizens. In other words, they fought this war precisely to understand who they were; what it meant to be Bolivian.

Bolivia has been a country without an identity, a failed State that has tried to be modern. We are not seeking a modern society, we're looking for a postmodern one.

Suma Qamaña

Depending on who you ask, 21st of December 2012 heralded the Summer Solstice, the Apocalypse, or, according to the Bolivian Government, the Pachakuti; the end of 'non-time'; the beginning of a new era. Before anyone shouts Newspeak, it's worth pointing out that Pachakuti



does have a historical meaning; it is the cyclical term in Aymara used to denote the 'turning back of time'. The new era promises a return to ancestral values and forms of living based on communitarian principles of reciprocity, identity and sustainability. Central to this process is a political philosophy based on Suma Qamaña, an ideal which translates to 'living well', and which is emphatically contrasted to the individualist ideal of 'living better'. Rather than having the individual at its centre, it is based on much larger political units such as communities, and Mother Earth herself, both of which are afforded with rights under Bolivian law and the Constitution.

In official literature published by the Bolivian Foreign Affairs Ministry, it is suggested that 'instead of talking of a National Development Plan, we maybe have to talk of a National Plan of Returning to Equilibrium, or a National Life Plan'. In what reads like a manifesto, they part ways with 'intellectuals from the left', arguing that theirs is not a fight for freedom, but rather a struggle for 'complementarity'. Cárdenas tells BX,

For me, Living Well is a consequence rather than an objective. It will only come into effect when there's true interculturality, when we can be proud of who we are and be strengthened in our identity. Socialism and capitalism are siamese twins. The only thing they concern themselves with is managing capital. Those on the right want the market to control it, those on the left want the State to be responsible. Yet they're both industrializing and predatory.

Such an approach can be confusing to political philosophers used to categorising politicians and parties in terms of left, right, capitalist and socialist. Cárdenas tells us, 'We have a philosophy which differs from Marxism in that it's not based on the elimination of the opponent, but in our complementarity'. What's perhaps most interesting is that this political discourse distances itself from traditionally socialist agendas, with which the government has heretofore been associated most frequently.

Who we are: realities and projections

The corollary of this position is that in order to reinvent our statehood we must take ourselves as a point of departure. Cárdenas tells me 'our task is to project identity as a political horizon'. In other words, we must adopt forms of government which reflect and correspond to our unique plurinational identity. To say this, though, is to conceal a deeply complex process through which bolivianeity is configured. The latest Constitution tells us the country is made up by at least 36 different nations, and this doesn't even include the innumerable permutations that arise from a history of intranational and international migration. How can we know (let alone preserve) who we are if we're constantly changing?

Tourism, a theme developed in this issue (p.10), touches on these very questions. The government has set itself the goal of becoming a major worldwide tourist destination by 2025, a goal the Vice Minister for Tourism Marko Machicao, and Minister for Culture Pablo Groux (See Connor Larson's piece on Cultural Development on p.20) are responsible for setting into motion. The idea, we're told, is to promote and sell what's uniquely Bolivian: 'landscapes, history and identity'. Yet this brings with it its own challenges. Cárdenas picks up on the problems with Bolivia's historic projection of itself as an under-developed (or at best of times developing country).

Identity involves our capacity to strengthen ourselves. We cannot continue projecting the image of impoverished Bolivian ***indios*** *searching among the rubbish, asking Europe for help. It's to exploit the poverty of these people, instead of showing their lives and worldviews. Communitarian tourism would involve an equal exchange; for an English family, for example, to live alongside a Guaraní family, and for this process to be managed by the family itself, instead of a tourism agency. I believe that we have to show that we're not a museum piece, we're a reality.*

For 500 years they have tried to make us disappear. But we're saying 'here we are', and moreover 'we are'. Insofar as identities are weak they will always run the risk of being penetrated and distorted. We mustn't fear globality. Just because I'm Aymara it doesn't mean I'm condemned to only dancing my own music. That would be to close myself out. It's precisely because I know who I am I can dance to Rock'n'Roll better than any Rock'n'Roller. I could live in New York but I don't stop being Aymara. The churches here are built on top of our sacred places. We won't do what colonisers did and tear down Christian churches. We must recover our sacred sites without destroying those who belong to others.

Inequality Reinvented

The vision outlined by Cárdenas is true to the principle of complementarity mentioned earlier, and stems from a recognition of the multiplicity of identities which exist in a country like Bolivia. Contrary to the opposition's portrayal of the government as ethno-centrist or even discriminatory, there's a distinct recognition of the legitimacy of new hybrid forms of identity which exist alongside expressions with more ancestral roots.

Nonetheless, there remain very real forms of discrimination and inequality deeply rooted not necessarily in government, but in society itself (turn to p.18 for Carlos Shah's analysis of racial politics, or Felicia Lloyd's piece on sexual diversity and discrimination on p.16). To assess whether there's been any tangible progress, (or development, or whatever we choose to call it) for the 10,3 million Bolivians counted in the 2012 national Census, we must look closer at day-to-day practices and attitudes. These are perhaps best explored anecdotally. Miguel, a friend we spoke to for this issue recounts a telling recent experience which highlights the tectonic shifts which are underway in Bolivia's social structures. 'I was having dinner at Megacenter with the relative of a former President the other day, with Cholitas and their families sitting on either side of the table where

we were eating. Such a sight was unthinkable just a decade ago'.

Indeed, my personal experience involves numerous memories of restaurants and clubs where unstated but over-implied admission policies discriminated based on class and race; categories often equivalent in pre-Morales Bolivia. All public establishments are now forced, by law, to post visible signs on the walls which say 'Todos Somos Iguales Ante la Ley' - 'We're All Equal Before the Law'.

Yet this apparent change in social attitudes to race may equally be a reflection of the growing purchasing power of elite members of social and ethnic groups which were previously impoverished. Lower discrimination may not be a direct result of state policies, but of market forces. While income inequality (measured by the Gini Coefficient) has been gradually declining over the past decade, the most significant change is that the categorical equivalence between social background and economic power has now been broken. The rise of a new bourgeoisie, in large part successful merchants of Aymara descent, is apparent in **Prestes**, parties where opulent displays of wealth are materialised in lavish costumes, and where legendary musical acts such as Bronco and Sonido Master are payed to fly over from Mexico and play at private functions, with some parties allegedly costing upwards of $50,000. There's also a reported increase in the number of second-generation indigenous rural migrants who are now able to access education at private institutions such as the Universidad Católica, previously a reserve of white wealthy elites. Finally, it's no longer a truism that El Alto is a place where only poor people live. Nonetheless, it might be too early to celebrate just yet; what we may be witnessing is not so much the end of social injustice, but the ascent of a new breed of elites which may eventually give rise to unsuspected forms inequality and discrimination.

How can we know (let alone preserve) who we are if we're constantly changing?

It may also be insightful to reflect upon the mismatch between the ancestral values on which the so-called Andean Cosmovision is said to be based, and the present-day expressions of this ethnocultural group in urban areas. Those who romanticise the Aymara as a communitarian, austere and Mother-Earth-respecting people, too quickly overlook the reputation they have developed as extraordinarily successful merchants and, paradoxically, expert capitalists. It is not unusual to see wealthy members of these elites driving gas-guzzling Hummers and throwing the aforementioned parties, where alcohol consumption and extravagance are the norm. In the eyes of some (such as the Bolivian philosopher HCF Mansilla, whose views I don't share but I believe deserve attention), these Aymara merchants can even be said to have successfully colonised other regions of the country.

Whither Democracy?

Evo's election in 2006 with 53.7% of the popular vote, and subsequent re-election in 2009 with 63% gave him and his party an overwhelming majority, and an unprecedented mandate to govern (Read Frans Robyns' opinionated analysis of Democratisation and it's developments on p.6). What's worried some opposing voices is the feeling that in its decolonisation efforts, the government has swung the balance of power completely in the opposite direction, and that the reinstatement of indigenous identities and policies to favour underprivileged have come at the expense of middle- and upper-classes. Others have accused them of favouring particular (Andean) forms of indigeneity. In Tocquevillian terms, they sense a 'tyranny of the majority' has been underway since his reelection.

The fundamental problem with many of these criticisms lies in the entitlement they imply. Large-scale social shifts (along with the redistribution policies, and reshuffling of political and economic elites that come with them), bring about inevitable social tensions, something the South African experience has been teaching us for the past two decades. Equality is a correlative term, and those who feel the gap between themselves and those below them narrowing, will also feel understandable unease at seeing their social, political and economic power slip away from their hands.

Reinvention of politics aside, the country paints a healthy and positive macroeconomic picture, even by the most traditional of measures. As Manuel Canelas, a political analyst and host of the TV programme 'Esta Casa no es un Hotel' tells us: 'GDP has been growing 5% year on year, tax revenue collection has been on a steady increase, and the ratio between national reserves and GDP is currently among the highest in the world. The welfare funds the government has implemented reach 3 in every 10 Bolivians, and poverty has gone down by 13%'. Of course, there have been influencing factors, such as high international prices for natural resources the country exports (such as gas, and minerals), yet the government can still be credited for ensuring a majority of the revenues from these exports go into the treasury rather than to multinationals (see p.12 for Caroline Risacher's piece on Bolivia's opportunity to become a Lithium superpower).

Aruskipasipxañanaka

Bolivia is changing in all sorts of unexpected ways, there's no doubt about it. There's increased wealth spreading its way across society, but we're also experiencing a new wave of consumerism most blatantly reified by monstrous American-style multiplex shopping centres. There's positive macroeconomic growth yet segments of the population fear the government now has too much power, that in the absence of any credible or coherent opposition, democracy runs a risk of being hijacked.

The key issue, as I see it, is the debate surrounding what's fundamentally good or valuable in a country such as ours, and who gets to decide on these matters: individual citizens or government high-priests. On this point I'm undecided - while I share the government's vision of what kind of society we should aim towards, I'm not convinced anyone should have the right to determine which states of happiness and wellbeing are more legitimate than others; more worth having. These ideals, valid as they are, ought to come from our spiritual leaders and cultural figures, rather than our politicians; they might then gain supporters independently of political allegiance. Cárdenas is refreshing and humanistic on this point, projecting his ideals beyond the country's borders:

We're like a flower that's blooming after a long winter. I think our indigenous communities offer hope to the rest of the world. We have a philosophy to share. In the same way they came to evangelise us and show us a new way of life, today we have the mission to evangelise the rest of the world, to show them there is a different way to live.

Overall, the main development seems to be that our understanding of development itself is changing. We're being forced to rethink what it means to live in society, and what responsibilities we owe each other, not as citizens but as human beings. This can only be a good thing.

By Amaru Villanueva Rance

N.B. Several Spanish and Aymara words are marked in **bold** throughout this issue. Their meanings can be found in our glossary



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